

LABS

WASHINGTON: AP

Approved For Release 2004/03/11 : CIA-RDP73B00296R000300080068-7

Plain of Jars Operation With U.S. Aid Reported

By TAMMY ARBUCKLE
Special to The Star

VIENTIANE — The United States has launched a new secret operation against the Plain of Jars, a Communist-held area in northern Laos, well-informed sources say. "Commando raiders, some led by American military men in CIA employ have penetrated as far as Lima 22, an air strip in the east central plain.

U.S. aircraft are landing on the plain. An Air America C123 transport was stranded with its American crew on the plain for a night, according to well-informed sources. U.S. officials, however, refuse to discuss the operation making it difficult to assess the operation's exact magnitude or objectives.

One American source claimed Meo Gen. Vang Pao was "strengthening and improving his defensive position." Sources said Vang Pao took Ban Na, a key hill overlooking the plain last Tuesday. Unfortunately this claim of strengthening defenses does not jell with the U.S. presence on the plain or the excessive secrecy cloaking the operation on the part of U.S. and Lao officials.

Fraught With Danger

To clear North Vietnamese from the hills south of the plain and establish positions on hill-tops overlooking the plain would be excellent, as it would give Vang Pao's forces a breather until the next dry season.

However, to go onto the plain is fraught with both military and political danger.

In 1969, a joint U.S. and Lao operation, About Face took the plain from the Communists briefly, but resulted in massive Hanoi retaliation which drove CIA-led Meos back farther than ever before and almost resulted in the secret base of Long Chen falling. A new offensive could mean that final end to feelers for talks between the government and Communists and lead to fresh Hanoi offensives. Hanoi has frequently made clear it will not tolerate a U.S. or government presence on the plain of

Jars and has sufficient force to push the corrupt, ill-managed Lao forces off plain again whenever it wants.

Some military sources have suggested that the Plain of Jars push is to relieve the pressure on the Meo base of Bouam Long, north of the plain.

When correspondents tried to find what the operation was about, Gen. Thongph Knoksy, the government spokesman, dodged into the corridors of Lao headquarters. U.S. officials adamantly refuse to speak unless Thong Phun speaks first.

It is almost unbelievable that after Senate censure and publication of the Pentagon documents, a U.S. mission in Laos should once again resort to secrecy particularly concerning a U.S. run operation close to North Vietnam and China.

The operation previously resulted in tough Communist retaliation and caused considerable government and civilian loss in 1969. There can be no doubt the operation is considerable in size. The Pathet Lao radio which, although it is Communist, has been most truthful to date on Lao operations, says three regiments of Vang Pao's forces are involved. Vientiane military sources say two Thai battalions and six Lao Meo battalions are involved. U.S. air power is again extremely active over the plain, where some 5,000 civilians are still living. American embassy officials are trying to blame Vang Pao for the operation. "Vang Pao is very much his own man," three American officials said separately.

As all three used the same words, one can only assume somebody told them to say this. Vang Pao's forces are advised, paid, armed, clothed and sometimes led by CIA employes and it is impossible for the general to do anything big without American approval. Some middle-level Americans are already having second thoughts.

They fear that if Vang Pao finds no early Hanoi opposition he may continue to advance, bringing the U.S. into a new northern Laos debacle.

CRC, 8/26/2003

Approved For Release 2004/03/11 : CIA-RDP73B00296R000300080068-7

Next 2 Page(s) In Document Exempt

25X1